Philm | *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier – 2011)

"a beautiful movie about the end of the world"

The film *Melancholia.*

Derived from the Latin astrum, *the term 'disaster' connotes a misfortune that befalls us on account of a malevolent star.*[1]
– Christopher Peterson

Humanity itself as an ongoing historical project provides the implicit frame of reference for most of our judgments about what matters. Remove that frame of reference, and our sense of importance— however individualistic it may be in its overt content—is destabilized and begins to erode. We need humanity to have a future if many of our own individual purposes are to matter to us now. Indeed, I believe that something stronger is true: we need humanity to have a future for the very idea that things matter to retain a secure place in our conceptual repertoire.

…what matters to us now depends on what we think will happen later.[2]
– Samuel Scheffler

Most disaster films leave us with the consolation that at least a small contingent survives, that it's not all over: there will be survivors to tell the story, to appreciate what happened, maybe to learn from it, but, at any rate, to start up again and go on.

In 2013, Samuel Scheffler published a book called *Death and the Afterlife*.[3] By the title, he wasn't referring to heaven or hell but the life that we expect will still be here after *we*, specifically, are gone. He makes the case that for all our evident concerns for our individual lives we *also* identify with those who will go on with theirs after we are done with ours. It matters to us that they will go on even if we are not around to witness. He conjures a thought experiment: suppose somehow you were assured that the world would end thirty days after you are dead. The duration and physical quality of your life will be full and unaffected, only that of everyone who survives you will be cut short. You *know* this. Would this make a difference to you? How you went about your business and projects? How you faced each day?

1. "The Magic Cave of Allegory: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*," Christopher Peterson.
2. *The Afterlife* (pdf), Tanner Lectures, p. 165.
3. Podcast interview with Scheffler. The core of the book is comprised of the Tanner Lectures, and can be listened to here.

Scheffler thinks it would fundamentally change the way you view the world. It would drive home a profound futility that you could not experience any other way. If, *unknown to you*, the world did, in fact, end thirty days after you are dead, your ignorance would spare you this experience. Ignorance, maybe, isn't bliss, but it leaves space for it. The *mere* possibility of the total annihilation of the world as you have known it[4] is not enough to trigger this reaction.

Also, it is significant for the thought experiment that it's thirty days or some fathomable period. Hearing that it will be four billion years off won't, unless you are Alvy Singer, ruin your day.

The ultimate disaster is the one that ends, not only your experience, but every memory of it housed anywhere as well as every object of memory. It would be as if you would die twice over: your death in addition to any trace of the world that mattered to you. No one asks for existence, but having been granted it, it created space for desire, at least for its meaning, if not always for its duration.

It is still an open question in astrobiology whether life like ours exists anywhere else in the universe. On the one hand, the vastness of the universe seems to invite the possibility. On the other, ever since Enrico Fermi asked "where is everybody?" the reasons why we are likely alone in the universe (or will forever be kept wondering) have piled up.

Astropsychology

In von Trier's film, Justine, ex-bride, informs her sister Claire, with cold conviction, that the world is evil, "no one will miss it," and that life on this planet is the only life there is or ever has been – "and not for long" – as she waits with her distressed sister Claire and young nephew, Leo, for the end of it.

By "no one will miss it," she means *both* that she deems it not worthy of being missed *and*, more literally, worthy or not, *no one will be in a position* to miss it. It is this second fact that helps to explain the value judgment in the first. A melancholy judgment may not affirm life but it may be *perfectly* rational.

Dispositionally prepared for disaster by her depression *before* everyone else in the film seems to get it, Justine suggests to her nephew they build a magical cave made of sticks that will save them. Her life ended sometime before. There remains only compassion for those whose illusions still torment them – still tease them like the rogue planet Melancholia did as it flew by so close, then backed away, only to boomerang back with mathematically elegant vengeance for the kill.[5] As though all of this was a mistake and should never have happened, or as if there are no mistakes because whatever you conceive as the opposite of a mistake isn't either. The magical cave would be the last story needing telling.

---

4. Absent some quirk of personality or disposition like that of Justine in the film.
5. "New Supercomputer Simulation Sheds Light on Moon's Origin," *NASA Ames Research Center.* The simulation models how the moon was born, according to the latest science (2023)... Justine may have been wrong in a curious way. Maybe, the world we know it is the only one with life ever, but it was the catastrophic impact of a planet size rock called Theia that reorganized and supplemented the earth's elemental composition and permitted life here in the first place – birthing the moon on the side. But is taking consolation in such cosmic trauma rational or just something we do?... Coincidentally, the asteroid Apophis is due to fly by the earth on Friday the 13th in April of 2029. An asteroid *this* big only passes by the earth *this* close every 7,000 years. The flyby is not "supposed" to be more than an exciting opportunity for the scientific community. Claire's husband, John, in the movie, expresses a similar faith in our application of mathematics. Margins of error are as mathematically *factual* as probabilities.

Why make a film about the end of the world *beautiful?*

...as I could find no tree in the wood fine enough to hang myself, I linger.
– Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)[6]

The desire of the moth for the star
– Percy Bysshe Shelley, *To —*

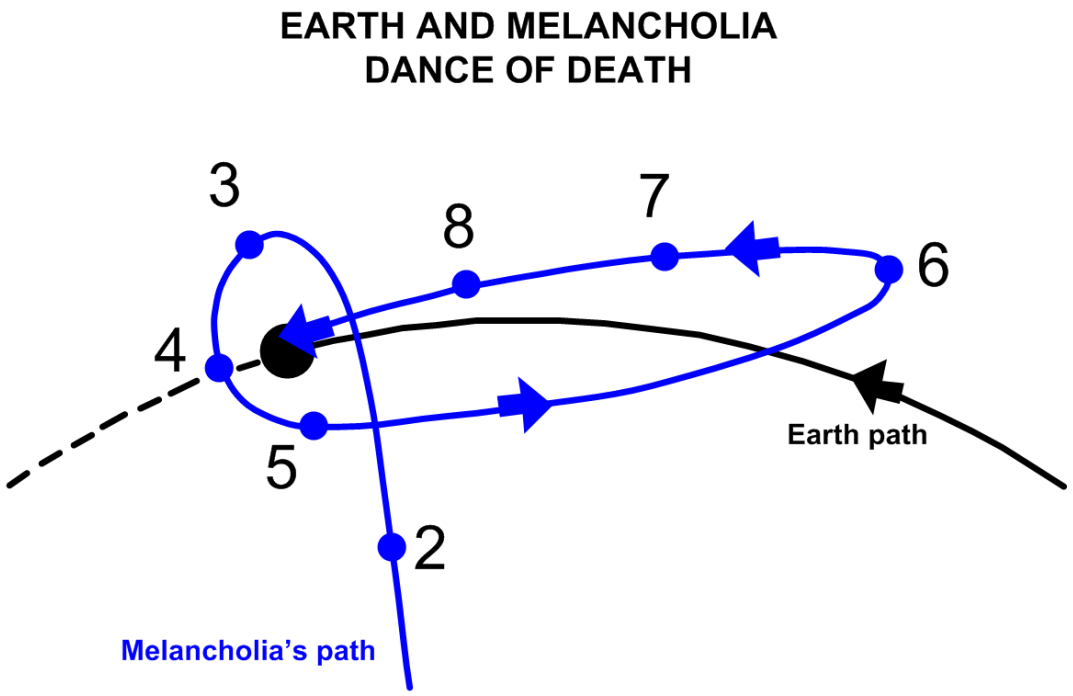
No ordinary branch on an ordinary tree will do. It must be special.

What is *good* (moral) and what is *correct* (truthful) has sometimes also been called *beautiful*. It can seem, then, that these three adjectives go together. Medieval thinkers called them the Transcendentals. But this is a mistake, born of common or local association, like a popular myth in the United States that all rivers flow south because south is downhill. “South” and “downhill” are even synonymous in some idiomatic usages. A different geography easily belies the idea. The end of the world is hard to understand as *good* for creatures whose optimism about the future was naturally selected for. Its *correctness* is deeply resistant to rational consideration…

But might it yet be imagined as *beautiful?* As the ultimate in sublimity, the form of beauty adulterated with fear, described by Kant? Like standing on the edge of a deep precipice. “*With* fear” because of the threat it poses to the self-conferred righteousness of the good and the truth.

As a moth is drawn to a flame. Beauty, unlike goodness and truth, promises nothing but keeps its promises, while still effectively beckoning. Beauty is the psychological correlate of gravity. It is the first and last value. It drew together those responsible for your being here. It wasn’t goodness or truth. What was in the eye of the beholder came before the other values and, we may hope, when, not if, all else fails, it will usher us out. It may make it easier to take. Nature’s final offer of consolation.

6. 1st Partition, Section II, Member II, Subsection X.



Burton on melancholia and knowledge of the stars

> Paracelsus is of opinion, "that a physician without the knowledge of stars can neither understand the cause or cure of any disease, either of this or gout, not so much as toothache; except he see the peculiar geniture and scheme of the party affected." And for this proper malady, he will have the principal and primary cause of it proceed from the heaven, ascribing more to stars than humours, "and that the constellation alone many times produceth melancholy, all other causes set apart." He gives instance in lunatic persons, that are deprived of their wits by the moon's motion; and in another place refers all to the ascendant, and will have the true and chief cause of it to be sought from the stars. Neither is it his opinion only, but of many Galenists and philosophers, though they do not so peremptorily maintain as much. "This variety of melancholy symptoms proceeds from the stars," saith Melancthon: the most generous melancholy, as that of Augustus, comes from the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in Libra: the bad, as that of Catiline's, from the meeting of Saturn and the moon in Scorpio.
>
> – Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)[7]

Substitute genic for the astronomical or humoral – and Burton's observation rings plausible. Perhaps one day we will discover that astral encounters or flybys tinker with DNA… occasioning a new interpretation for "astrology" with more empirical content. Perhaps that day will never come – possibly because there is no empirical content to astrology; more likely, because our time will run out.[8]

7. 1st Partition, Section II, Member I, Subsection IV.
8. This because close observation of scientific developments leads to the conclusion that science is in the business of "knowledge obsolescence." Another way of saying that science is an epistemic *process*, and not about accumulating a store of fixed points of reference – even if we confine ourselves to the self-belittling duration of its practice.

Keynes on the short run

By his famous line "in the long run we are all dead" John Maynard Keynes meant to rebuke classical economists who too facilely counseled waiting out bad times with patience, letting "natural" economic downturns correct themselves in due course.

> But this *long run* is a misleading guide to current affairs. *In the long run* we are all dead. Economists set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they can only tell us that when the storm is long past the ocean is flat again.
>
> – John Maynard Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (1923)

We may be excused for noticing we live in the short term and so must sometimes act accordingly, Keynes meant to suggest. But between the advisability of *carpe diem* and the incomprehensibility of the long run, we are exposed.

Resources

"Lars von Trier - MELANCHOLIA - Ego & Extinction - Film Analysis," (video) an inspired and exhaustive meditation by science fiction writer James Reich: "This analysis of Lars von Trier's beautiful 'Melancholia' is the first episode in a series of videos based on the work I'm doing toward a book on the psychology, philosophy, and ecopsychic content of science fiction film. In this episode I talk about 'Melancholia' through the work of Schopenhauer, Freud, Jung, Kierkegaard, and others, and offer some thoughts on the breakdown of Friedrich Nietzsche, the nature of science fiction catastrophe narrative, the will, and nature."

"Hauntingly Accurate Portrayals of Severe Mental Illness at a Theater Near You," Richard LeBeau, *Psychology in Action*, 12 December, 2011. The view from *clinical* psychology.

"The Magic Cave of Allegory: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*," Christopher Peterson *Discourse*, Volume 35, Number 3, Fall 2013. The view from *philosophical* psychology. Quoted at length below.

Passages from "The Magic Cave of Allegory: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*" by Christopher Peterson

> 401
> "My analyst told me that melancholiacs will usually be more level-headed than ordinary people in a disastrous situation, partly because they can say: 'What did I tell you?'"[4] This notion that paranoid anticipation of the worst ironically makes melancholics more prepared to confront actual disaster is voiced in the film by Claire (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg). Responding to the unaltered emotional state of her sister Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) in the wake of Earth having survived its first close encounter with Melancholia, Claire asserts, "Oh, you have it easy, don't you? Just imagine the worst thing possible." Since her worldview is enduringly negative, Justine finds no peace or consolation in Earth's apparent [but temporary] escape from destruction.

...

Indeed, a fundamental, repetitive characteristic of the genre is its preoccupation with survival, the continued existence of at least one person beyond the scene of devastation (although multiple people of both genders is preferable, or else the human race could not propagate itself).

...

This two-fold affirmation and denial of death is central to Rudolph Maté's *When Worlds Collide* (1951), whose depiction of Earth's destruction by a rogue star named Bellus clearly influenced von Trier's film.

True to generic form, a small number of Earth's inhabitants are able to pilot a spacecraft to a planet orbiting around Bellus called Zyra, whose habitability promises the possibility of a future for the human race notwithstanding our planet's total annihilation.

Melancholia, on the other hand, leaves us with no survivors, thus depriving the spectator of the routine pleasures afforded by the disaster genre—that is, the sublation of finitude by virtue of which our identification with the survivors permits us to imagine our own vicarious triumph over death.

…

As cognitive psychology would have us believe, *Melancholia* figures merely as the sign of an exaggerated, distorted perception of the world.

Melancholia as psychological distortion is therefore not of this world.

…

When reviewers equate melancholia with psychological depression, they adopt a conventional conception of allegory whereby symbol and meaning are fully aligned: a total eclipse of the sign. An allegorical reading of the film in this sense is attractive precisely because it figures absolute death and destruction as completely other, impossible, and unreal.

Its prophylactic function is therefore similar to that of the so-called magic cave that Justine (whom Leo calls "Aunt Steelbreaker") constructs with her nephew Leo prior to Melancholia's impact with Earth. A meager assemblage of eight sticks of wood gathered from a nearby forest, Aunt Steelbreaker's cave is no match for interplanetary collision. Of course, Justine knows that the cave bears no magical properties. Yet her willingness to construct it manifests an unusual display of courage, calm, and above all compassion for her nephew and sister who are utterly terrified of the impending doom. That the content of any allegory is never absolutely certain, moreover, means that Justine's depression could metaphorize the destruction of the world rather than the inverse. As Sigmund Freud observed in "Mourning and Melancholia," these related yet distinct psychological conditions are both characterized by a certain loss and absence of the "world."[8] This disappearance of the world may function metaphorically in Freud's account, but

Melancholia could be read precisely as inverting this figurative logic; that is, the film obscures Earth's literal destruction behind the allegorical shadow of melancholia/depression. The complete destruction of Earth seems indisputably to be the worse of these two possibilities. On the other hand, its science fiction implausibility forms a protective barrier between us and Justine's melancholia insofar as imagining the extraordinary event of the world's demise is so literally and figuratively out there that it fails to threaten with the same force as the far more ordinary and common condition of depression. After all, many of us have lived through psychological depression, but none of us have witnessed the end of the world.

…

Mourning is by definition hyperbolic because it is thrown beyond restricted temporal and spatial boundaries, like a rogue planet that exceeds its orbit. These two forms of hyperbole are not merely analogous to the extent that mourning figures a certain collision of worlds: "There is no longer any world, it's the end of the world, for the other at his death. And so I welcome in me this end of the world, I must carry the other and his world, the world in me."[12] Derrida's language necessarily slides between the singular world (of the other) and the world in totality.

To grasp this vacillation fully, we must take into account the final line of the poem by Paul Celan that animates Derrida's analysis: "The world is gone, I must carry you." The Freudian paradigm of successful mourning assures us that the death of the other is not the end of the world. Of course, it is the end of the other's world, but for me it is not an absolute catastrophe, as difficult and as painful as the experience of loss may be. Derrida's reflections on the world's irrecuperable loss resonate with his discussion of Bataille in *Writing and Difference*: specifically, the distinction that the latter makes between general and restricted economies.[13] The world is not a self-enclosed whole that can effectively patch over the cracks and fissures that appear each time a singular being leaks out of existence.[14] The world is gone when we lose others because it is not a restricted economy or a closed system that can fully recover from its losses. This principle of irrecoverable loss recalls John Donne's famous declaration that "Any Man's *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*."[15] Whereas Donne believes that death will be undone in an afterlife, Derrida maintains that such reversibility is an illusion that disavows the irredeemable loss of others.

An uncanny parallel thus emerges between von Trier's depiction of depression as interplanetary collision and Derrida's equally hyperbolic equation of melancholia with the end of the world. The term "melancholia" corresponds at once to a celestial body, a psychological condition, and to the general condition of being-in-the-world. Life itself is mourning. Of course, behind Derrida's notion of originary mourning is the shadow of Heidegger, for whom *Dasein* "is always already dying" in its "being-toward-its-end."[16] The Heideggerian notion of being-toward-death characterizes our relationship to finitude in terms of an originary "thrownness."

…
406
The term "carry" thus "speaks the language of birth" as well as describes the experience of the survivor, the one who bears the other in mourning.[18] Among the series of arresting images with which *Melancholia* begins is that of Claire carrying her young son Leo across the golf course on her estate, returning to seek shelter after having engaged in a panicked yet vain effort to escape

the rogue planet's impact. As with the other images that comprise the opening sequence, Claire and Leo are portrayed in extreme slow motion, her desperation and futility aggravated by the visual deceleration. The world is both already gone for mother and child, this "singular couple of solitary beings," and also not yet entirely gone. The world is on the verge of an absolute disappearance after which there will be no world to carry.

It might seem that the disappearance of the world either through its actual, physical destruction or as a consequence of the other's [407] death is distinct from maternal bearing. Yet natality and finitude are never far apart to the extent that maternity means giving birth to a mortal being who must continue to be borne by others long after he or she is *born*.

If the generic formula of the disaster film typically stresses survival as a corrective to destruction, then there is no more culturally cherished image than that of the child to bear this future. Quite deliberately seeking to quash such optimism, von Trier's film insists on the impossibility of life in the wake of Melancholia's impact.

Consider the conversation in which Justine informs her sister that "the earth is evil. We don't need to grieve for it. . . . Nobody will miss it." Claire responds, "But where would Leo grow up?" Claire's response betrays a logic of disavowal that is at once poignant and darkly comic. What part about the world coming to an end does she not understand? Claire can accept her own death perhaps, but she cannot contemplate the death of her son, who must survive as the sign and trace of her own immortality. Apparently surrendering to the possibility of Earth's destruction and therefore of both her and Leo's demise, Claire then suggests that "there may be life somewhere else." Yet she barely finishes her sentence before Justine emphatically asserts, "But there isn't." She goes on to ascribe to herself a clairvoyant ability to "know things. . . . When I say we're alone, we're alone. Life is only on Earth, and not for long." It does not really matter whether Justine truly "knows things" and is therefore correct that the impact of Melancholia will entail not only the destruction of life on Earth but also the annihilation of all life in the universe. Justine's certainty may turn out to be just as reliable as that of John, whose confidence in science is dealt a devastating blow when he discovers that Melancholia will collide with Earth notwithstanding scientific predictions, a revelation that leads him to commit suicide rather than face the end along with his wife, son, and sister-in-law. What is crucial is that Justine's assertion of absolute destruction and loss is aligned with the film's deliberate positioning of itself as an *antidisaster* disaster film. On the one hand, the film depicts a destruction of Earth that is quite literally disastrous. Derived from the Latin *astrum*, the term "disaster" connotes a misfortune that befalls us on account of a malevolent star.

On the other hand, the destruction of Earth is not disastrous in accordance with Hollywood convention, which requires that the scene of destruction, no matter how devastating, cannot equate to the absolute termination of all life. What Derrida once said of the possibility of total nuclear war thus also applies to Melancholia: its impact allows us to imagine the "possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces."[19]… [408] If Melancholia is apocalyptic, then it begets what Derrida characterizes as an apocalypse without apocalypse, a revelation that unveils no truth.

…

A cosmic joke in more ways than one, the nineteenth hole mocks both the extravagant wealth that John displays and his confidence in astronomical calculations. The faith in numbers that leads him to accept scientists' [409] miscalculation of Melancholia's trajectory is thus aligned with a farcical underestimation of the number of cups on his putting green.

While Derrida maintains that the world is destroyed "in defiance of arithmetic" because the death of each singular being endlessly repeats the end of the world, the destructive force of Melancholia also defies arithmetic on a more basic level by virtue of an unavoidable incalculability, the "margin of error" whose existence John finally acknowledges in the wake of the planet's initial flyby.

…

It's the end of the world, so let's gather at the nineteenth hole and "party like it's 1999" (as Prince's apocalyptic 1982 hit song implores us)? Claire is not exactly in the mood to celebrate, but once she finally accepts that the end of the world is nigh, she informs her sister that she wants to "do this the right way. . . . A glass of wine together, maybe." Justine responds:

> You want me to have a glass of wine on your terrace. . . . How 'bout a song? Beethoven's Ninth, something like that? Maybe we can light some candles? You want us to gather on your terrace to sing a song, have a glass of wine, the three of us? . . . Do you know what I think of your plan? . . . I think it's a piece of shit.

Whether Prince or Beethoven, Justine is not willing to provide a musical score for the apocalypse (ironically, von Trier is clearly happy to oblige, though his choice of soundtrack is Wagner). There will be no "Ode to Joy" for Justine; all men will not "become brothers," or perhaps more appropriately, all women will not become sisters. Against Claire's suggestion that a glass of wine on the terrace would make the end of the world "nice," Justine asks, "Why don't we meet on the fucking toilet"? Justine's cruelty is certainly objectionable, despite the naïveté of her sister's request for a dignified exit. Yet in the final moments of the film, it is Justine who provides if not a graceful death then one that softens *Melancholia's* impact by imagining an allegorical cushion in the form of the magic cave. Justine's indifference transforms into compassion once her nephew Leo registers his fear. The three of them construct an alternative world to the one that is about to be destroyed, a world that cannot provide any actual shelter, a world whose walls can be easily shattered but also mediate the characters' relationship to an unimaginable destruction. If Plato imagined his cave as [410] a shelter that deceives its prisoners into mistaking the shadows on the wall for reality, an error that can only be corrected once they are released into the light of day, once they truly enter the world, then perhaps the end of the world—whether we are talking about its literal, physical destruction or the loss of the world on the occasion of the other's death—cannot be approached directly; it can only be approached through a certain magical thinking that allows one to believe in the shadows after all.

410

If *Melancholia* goes where few (if any) disaster films dare to go— that is, to the absolute end of all life, ostensibly leaving behind no survivors or traces that could sublate this radical finitude—

then this depiction of absolute absence nevertheless depends on the possibility of survival that it would negate. Indeed, the film itself survives as a trace given to us as spectators who persist beyond the film's nihilistic conclusion. It might seem unwarranted to collapse the film's internal narrative world with the external world of its artifactual existence. Yet the film stresses not only the threat to life that interplanetary collision poses but also the possible destruction of all aesthetic creations, including its own digital traces. The opening sequence alludes to a number of famous artistic works, including John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1852), which is the inspiration behind the image of Justine floating on a pond in her wedding dress….

Absorbing these famous artistic creations into its visual landscape, *Melancholia* not only acknowledges a shared interest in their dark, melancholic aesthetics but also hints at their collective vulnerability to erasure, as if the film mourns not only the loss of life but also the end of all aesthetic productions that the world's destruction must necessarily engender.

411

As indicated by its tagline—"A beautiful movie about the end of world"—*Melancholia* is preoccupied not only with the annihilation of aesthetics but also with the aesthetics of annihilation.[20]

…

Melancholia's obliteration of all life on Earth thus exists only as a fantasy or fiction in the same manner that Derrida characterizes the threat of total nuclear destruction. As Peggy Kamuf puts it,

> the end of all life . . . is precisely what we cannot think except in a mode and as a vestige of survival beyond the annihilation that will therefore not have been total. Instead, the movement of a dialectic recuperates the loss of everything as not-quite everything; there remains a remainder for the speculative imagination, which can project the end of everything only by surviving to mourn it.[22]

412

Although it belongs to the archive of human artifacts whose devastation it portrays, the film *Melancholia* cannot avoid presenting itself as a symbolic cushion that softens or deadens the destructive impact of its literal, planetary namesake. *Melancholia* therefore cannot neutralize the movement of survival in a manner that would fully depart from the conventional disaster film. As Derrida observes, archivation and monumentalization ensure that "the burden of every death can be assumed symbolically by a culture and a social memory." Only the absolute destruction of all life and all symbolic capacity would generate the "absolute referent," which equates to "the absolute effacement of any possible trace; it is thus the only ineffaceable trace, . . . the trace of what is entirely other."[23] The "absolute referent"—that is, a referent wholly independent of language and representation—would require the total destruction of all life and all symbolic possibility. In this sense, the demand for the absolute or "pure" referent is ultimately nihilistic to the extent that any unmediated (nonrepresentational and nonsymbolic)

access to the world would necessitate the utter absence of all living witnesses and all artifactual representations of life.

...Derrida underscores that death cannot finally be owned.[26]

414

One could truly "get over" death only by denying it, that is, only by submitting it to the same amnesia that Derrida associates with the Freudian paradigm of successful mourning. This amnesia is precisely what the conventional disaster film induces by soliciting our identification with its surviving characters.

…

According to Edelman, Derrida ultimately "chooses" life over death and thereby betrays a "conservative rhetoric of futurism over real openness to an event."[32] At first glance, Derrida's comments seem to support such an interpretation. After all, he insists that

> he would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the yes, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say . . . about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death.[33]

Edelman opposes this "instinct for self-preservation" to "real openness to the unknown of the '*à-venir.*'"[34] Such "real openness" rhetorically implicates the Derridean *à venir* in an apparently false openness. Indeed, "real openness" suggests something like an absolute or unconditional affirmation of the future as "radically unknown" that runs counter to the formulation of life as survival, which negates the future by seeking to know it in advance.

416

Channeling Doris Day, Edelman sings *que sera, sera* to Derrida's ostensibly false openness to the future. Yet a purely nonanticipatory, unconditional relation to the future amounts to an impossible nonrelation. The future may not be ours to see, but we cannot not project ourselves into it, no matter how wrong our prognoses often turn out to be. Our relation to the future cannot but be anticipatory.

…

As a *quasi*-transcendental and silent performative, it is removed from any science of utterance, just as it is from any speech act theory. It is not, strictly speaking, an act; it is not assignable to any subject or to any object.

If it opens the eventness of every event, it is not itself an event. It is never *present* as such. What translates this nonpresence into a present yes in the act of an utterance or in any act at the same time dissimulates the archi-originary yes by revealing it.[46]

Whereas Edelman misreads the yes as a transcendental condition of possibility—an affirmation that stabilizes itself across innumerable repetitions—Derrida underscores the quasi-transcendental character of the yes, its status as both the condition of possibility and impossibility of a pure, unequivocal affirmation of alterity, life, and the future.[47] "Prior" to any affirmation or negation, whether spoken or written, the silent, unpresentable yes always already "says" yes to alterity. This "first" yes thus names an originary exposure to what Derrida elsewhere names the *arrivant*, which signifies whoever or whatever arrives (*ce qui arrive*), whether we judge this alterity to be welcome or monstrous, good or bad.[48] To claim that "deconstruction is always on the side of the yes, on the side of the affirmation of life," is thus not to choose life, as if Derrida is simply reiterating an old platitude, either in its biblical form or in its 1980s' incarnation on T-shirts worn by the British pop duo Wham! Far from making "the choice of life over death," Derrida crucially employs a vocabulary of preference.[49] Survival names "the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death." And who does not prefer living to death? Anyone who is still alive has already affirmed life, has already "said" yes. This yes is both archi-originary (a consent or acquiescence to the life into which we are thrown in the Heideggerian sense) and one that we reaffirm as long as we take measures to ensure our survival. We might indeed find ourselves in situations where we imagine death to be preferable to life, and we might even choose to hasten the advent of our death on the basis of this perception. Yet insofar as we are all "survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve," we can say "no" to life only on the condition of having first said "yes."

418

[The final scene]

We thus do not choose to be on the side of life so much as we find ourselves inhabiting its space of infinite irreversibility.[51]

...

Consider the film's final line of dialogue, "close your eyes," an imperative that Justine issues to Leo but also directs the spectator to deny by proxy the imminent threat of total destruction. Although she displays utter serenity and composure in the face of Melancholia's approach, Justine physically turns her back to its final arrival. And while she ostensibly builds the magic cave to

419

comfort her nephew, perhaps she too requires a symbolic bulwark against destruction. Whereas Leo dutifully obeys his aunt's command and Justine sits with her back to the looming rogue planet, only Claire turns her face toward the source of their impending demise. Death finds Claire watching, "trying to see beyond seeing," peering over a horizon that cannot ultimately be crossed.[54] Claire, however, does not maintain a steady, unflinching gaze toward Melancholia; instead, she repeatedly shifts between regarding the planet, Justine, and Leo before finally

covering her ears and staring directly toward the earth, a split second before Earth and all of its living inhabitants are consumed by a cataclysmic explosion. Each character thus embodies a different mode of comportment toward the absolute end. One can close one's eyes, turn one's back, or gaze directly at this end, yet none of these modes are presented to us as necessarily more authentic, dignified, or graceful than the others.

Melancholia may not teach us how to live or die authentically, but it cannot really be faulted for failing to achieve the impossible. Edelman is surely correct that our culture is deeply invested in a reproductive futurism that relies on the idealized figure of the child. Concluding with the construction of the magic cave, *Melancholia* seems poised to reproduce this ideology by giving Leo the task of voicing his fear when confronted with imminent death. What could be more predictably poignant than measuring the force of absolute destruction against the face of an innocent child? Yet the film does not fully reproduce this cultural fantasy insofar as Leo does not survive to engender a future. We are all that remains, we as spectators, "survivors who have been granted a temporary reprieve." The world is gone, yet as long we survive, which is to say as long we say "yes" to life, we must carry this world into a future that survives the total destruction to which we can never bear witness.

?

Nature stamps out dignity.

the philosophy club

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
The Philosophy Club in September 2026
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle